An Afghan Perspective on Education: Building on the Past for the Future

Introduction

For nearly a quarter century, turmoil in Afghanistan has deprived a generation of Afghans from the personal benefits of education as well as the benefits that might have accrued to national development. Education provides the underpinning for social and economic development and until education services are restored there is little hope for significant progress in Afghanistan. Perhaps even more important for the future of Afghans, education has the potential to provide a unifying experience, allowing for a national culture to emerge that is respectful and tolerant of all elements in the society. It is timely therefore for Afghans to come together to develop a vision and goals for an education system that can play a stabilizing role in the country. This vision is consistent with the principles of Education for All put forth in the Jomtien and Dakar conferences on world education.

To that end a group of Afghan educators met on November 10, 2001 in Peshawar with the support of UNICEF to begin to reflect on the future of education in Afghanistan and prepare a preliminary framework for education. The underlying sense of these discussions was that in looking to the future, there is much in Afghanistan's past experience that will help build a strong foundation for education. The educators subsequently met twice more in November to refine the ideas and determine a process that would expand the participation of other Afghan educators. On November 21, the group met with the ACBAR Education Sub-Committee to elaborate the ideas presented in this paper. At the end of the meeting, the participants endorsed the paper. Their names are attached.

The overall aim of this paper is to summarize and consolidate discussion on the future directions of Afghan education. There are two specific purposes: the first is to serve as a basis for discussion among Afghans about a future education system for Afghanistan, and the second is to provide a means of ensuring that an Afghan voice is heard in wider international discussions of Afghan education. The paper summarizes the key issues and priorities of education, the current "building blocks" holding promise for the future, the lessons learned from past experience, and recommended actions to begin rebuilding the education sector.

Key Issues

The key issues in education, expressed as needs, include:

- **A need for a common Afghan vision and goals.** The act of building a vision in itself is a unifying experience for Afghans, requiring an attitude of tolerance and cooperation.

- **A need for strong advocacy to ensure education a place on the resource agenda.** Although a pivotal sector, Afghan education has not received sufficient attention in the past during periods of crisis and change.

- **A need for long-tem commitment to Afghan education by the international community.** Past neglect of education has contributed to many of the current problems.

- **A need for a policy statement that recognizes education as the right of every child.** Within this framework, the delivery of education and the context in which it takes place can vary depending upon the needs of parents and children. Policies concerning girls' education need to be especially sensitive to cultural expectations or they may limit rather than encourage participation.

- **A need to broaden and enhance access to educational opportunities for all children, especially for girls.** Girls have more constraints on their participation than boys. Although women are the core of the family; their capacities have been limited by lack of access to services that would help them develop their potential. Constraining access for all children in Afghanistan are: an inadequate supply of teachers, the lack of secondary level programs to train potential teachers, the poor quality of most education programs, and the lack of safe schools where children feel protected and secure.

- **A need for school buildings and the rehabilitation of physical infrastructure** including laboratories and libraries is important in the long-term, although the immediate need is for quality programs, flexible delivery systems and effective institutional development and management.

- **A need to accelerate the pace of change in rural communities.** Equity questions of who goes to school are still important in many communities. Although demand for education is increasing, conservative families still exist. There is need to advocate for girls' education with resistant parents, making them aware of the importance of education both to girls and their families. Parents expect immediate returns on their investments, and need to be convinced that even greater benefits can be realized from long-term education. A more relevant curriculum with life skills content such as health, nutrition, first aid, disease prevention and home economics may satisfy parents' needs to see immediate benefits. Also, flexible schedules and quality instructional materials that are more effective at teaching academic skills can make the benefits of education more apparent. Communities need to be made aware of their responsibilities for removing the constraints that prevent children from attending school.

- **A need to address special education requirements.** Many children have been disabled by conflict. Others have physical, mental and learning disabilities that require special attention.

- **A need to address the efficiency issue of high dropout among school children.** The present poor quality of most programs neither teaches children academic skills nor provides them with information relevant to their daily lives. The absence of nearby higher stages of education causes some parents not to enroll their children at all or to withdraw them early. If access to extended education were easier and the content of programs fit parents' needs better, they would be more likely to send children to school and keep them there longer.

- **A need to establish a national body that manages education and remove it from the political arena.** The new body should provide leadership, and set out the goals and guidelines for education in the country. The new education leaders should be chosen for expertise rather than for their political connections.

- **A need to develop strong linkages between education authorities, aid agencies, and communities.** As part of this it is important to identify and define the roles government, UN agencies, NGOs, communities, and private and public entities can play in the provision of education services. Each needs to be given space to contribute in ways that are most appropriate.

- **A need to define the role and scope of community participation in education over the long term.** This requires building awareness of community roles and responsibilities in education, and the understanding that education is a shared responsibility of government and communities. Parents and community members need to participate in meaningful activities and decision-making related to education, especially in the following areas:
  - ensuring access and continued participation,
  - monitoring the quality and quantity of education,
  - making sure the content of the curriculum is relevant to local needs, and
  - making decisions about the form and timing of delivery.

- **A need to consolidate and standardize the education program from the multitude of existing programs.** The process requires institutionalizing education and ultimately establishing a sound Ministry of Education with the authority and capability to make informed decisions about education. There needs however to be space for communities and private groups to contribute and share responsibility for education. A critical aspect of this institutionalization is a sound accreditation and licensing capability across all programs to ensure the quality of graduates.

- **A need for sound policies and plans to address key educational issues.** At present there is little capacity for policy formulation and planning at the national level. The needs include:
  - developing proper and realistic policy and financial plans to address the problems of chronic under-resourcing of education, the need to find and expand revenues, and the importance of keeping costs low for children;
  - building human resource capability to manage the education system;
  - developing capacities to develop academic programs and the tools of supervision, monitoring, and assessment to ensure that the programs achieve their objectives;
  - creating the data collection systems to provide information needed for planning and evaluation.

- **A need to prioritize how resources should be expended to support various stages of education**: pre-school, primary, middle, high school, and university education. Primary schooling is a high priority, but this stage is now limited by the lack of middle and secondary opportunities to qualify those who want to become primary teachers. Although literacy is important, Afghans need advanced skills to build the nation. It would be short-sighted in the long term not to support other stages of education, including not only providing these opportunities but providing the means such as boarding facilities so that qualified rural children can access them.

- **A need for non-formal literacy and life skills programs for adults and youth** who have missed the opportunity to learn during the years of conflict.

- **A need to recognize the important role of teachers and their development in the education system** through:
  - providing adequate salaries to attract appropriate candidates, and incentives such as accommodation to encourage teachers to accept appointments to rural areas; there is a danger that teachers who have been teaching in rural areas may move to urban areas if they perceive their benefits to be greater in reopened government schools there;
  - providing proper recognition for the services teachers provide;

- developing flexible criteria for teacher recruitment to ensure potentially excellent candidates are not overlooked because of past disruptions in their academic and training opportunities; and building toward a future where more traditional qualifications can be required;
- providing training opportunities for up-grading teachers' subject content knowledge, methodologies and other capacities in pre-service and particularly in-service training.

- **A need to develop quality textbooks and supplementary materials.** These materials need to be based on the goals and objectives of a national curriculum. They need to address the specific learning skills outlined by the curriculum, provide clearly defined learning goals, and include life skills content relevant to Afghan children's lives. They need to be user-friendly and supportive of teachers in various environments. They need to be easy to distribute and require little support in the remote and difficult-to-access areas of Afghanistan. Children also require instructional aids, stationery and writing materials they need to learn.

Building Blocks

Building blocks exist to provide a strong foundation for Afghan education. They include:

- **Afghan children,** who are eager to take advantage of educational opportunities.

- **An increasingly positive attitude of Afghans toward education, particularly for girls.** Also there is increasing religious and cultural support for local education. Afghans are eager to take advantage of services that are seen to benefit themselves and their families.

- **Committed Afghan professionals inside Afghanistan, in neighboring countries and around the world** expressing willingness to work in rebuilding the country.

- **Organizations with experience providing education to Afghan children.** Numerous Afghan NGOs, community-based organizations, international NGOs and UN organizations have provided education services in Afghan refugee villages and inside Afghanistan.

- **Relationships formed in many areas among UN organizations and agencies, NGOs, and communities.**

- **Communities demonstrating willingness to take greater responsibility for education.** Previously schooling was considered the responsibility of government, but in the absence of effective government schooling, many families and communities have taken over education. The existence of home schools, community schools, donor-assisted schools, private initiative courses, and school committees (e.g. parent/teachers' associations and village education committees) demonstrates the growing sense of community ownership in local schools and a willingness to maintain them (with gardening, maintenance and security). When communities have taken over schools they have proved able to sustain them in the face of government efforts to regulate and control them.

- **Communities shaping schools to their needs** through creating the kind of comfortable atmosphere they want for their children. They often take advantage of traditional settings such as mosques and other community buildings to expand learning opportunities quickly.

- **The existence of a potential pool of local teachers.** During the conflict a number of educated men and women returned to villages and taught in community schools. The women served as role models for rural women and girls and helped educate a number of girls. Teachers are respected in Afghan society and consequently teaching has become an acceptable career option for women, even in rural society. A pool of male teachers who left teaching may also be re-employed if salaries are adequate to their families' needs. Other Afghan men and women educated in refugee villages abroad may return to teach in rural schools.

- **New core instructional materials developed and nearing publication.** Afghan educators have developed a Basic Competency Framework for math and languages (Pashto and Dari) in Grades 1 through 6. It set the guidelines for the preparation of innovative materials that teach academic skills and provide basic life skills information relevant to Afghan children.

- **Technologies to serve populations over vast distances and in hard-to-reach circumstances,** including radio education, correspondence courses, and materials suitable for self-instruction that can providing instruction to children, training for teachers, and language instruction for various groups. The media have also produced educational programming for Afghan families and children and have produced supplementary reading materials for children

- **Innovative approaches to sustain literacy and community education** (e.g. library boxes)

Key Lessons Learned

The key lessons learned from past experiences with Afghan education include:

- **The Afghan people are receptive to new ideas, once they are provided in a culturally sensitive way.** Culturally appropriate education works better.

- **A variety of delivery channels for education is necessary to reach children** in the multitude of physical, social and cultural environments that exist in Afghanistan. In the past the formal system did not meet all the needs and conditions of children and consequently a future system needs to provide for alternative delivery means. Involving communities in decisions about the delivery of education is essential if programs are to be attended and sustained in rural areas.

- **Community participation is key and works well in Afghanistan in promoting education.** Governments have changed but communities remained and sustained support for education despite all the difficulties of the past. UN agencies and NGOs that provided education services are respected and recognized by communities for their contributions.

- **Afghans recognize the need for more equitable distribution of opportunities** geographically so that all children benefit. There is also need for better distribution of resources to the several stages of education. Children need to be able to continue to the highest secondary and tertiary level they are capable of achieving if the nation is to benefit from educated professionals.

- **Afghans have learned that education needs to be divorced from politics and military purposes,** even while recognizing that there needs to be political will and commitment to build an effective national education system.

- **Education programs need to be interesting and relevant to children** if they are to learn what they need to know.

- **Experience has shown that new technologies can provide effective tools for better education delivery.**

Recommended Actions

The following actions are recommended to prepare for a national education program:

- **Begin advocacy to make education a key policy issue** for authorities and assistance agencies that will be supporting Afghan education.

- **Engage a dialogue on sound financing and policy options** for education that focus on the importance of approaching education realistically and systemically with all components actively reinforcing one another.

- **Develop the vision, plans and objectives for education** including the technical structures, curricula, and delivery systems needed to carry them out.

- **Take stock of education authorities', communities' and other agencies' capacities and plans** for the future to better coordinate and make use of what will be available.

- **Analyze the institutional models the existed before in Afghanistan and other options.**

- **Consider and define the complementary roles of NGOs/UN agencies/other organizations.**

- **Develop coordination mechanisms** to allow for cooperation, mutual reinforcement of objectives and sharing of ideas, and to avoid duplication of effort or activities that work at cross-purposes.

- **Identify necessary expertise both internal and external.**

- **Determine the incentives that will motivate skilled professionals** to rebuild the education system.

- **Prepare a plan of action to address equity questions** in the country.

- **Encourage the development of cost-effective innovative approaches to flexible delivery** that allow education to reach children living under various conditions.

- **Develop a reliable system for collection of information** that can be used in planning.

- **Develop effective monitoring/supervision/assessment systems** that from the start will permit continuous improvements in education components.

- **Widen the dialogue on education within communities** to include religious personnel and other platforms.

- **Encourage teachers to become positive role models** for children and their parents.

- **Strengthen and expand parent/teacher groups and school committees**, giving them space to act in support of local schools.
- **Encourage cost-sharing arrangements between government, parents and other sources of funding,** and mobilize more support from within communities, both in-kind and financial.
- **Mobilize potential support for local schools** from untapped educated individuals.
- **Prepare a receptive policy framework to maintain existing and encourage new private initiatives** in formal and non-formal education.
- **Consider the question of language learning**: mother-tongue, national languages, and foreign languages.

Participant List

The Afghan educators who have reviewed and endorsed this paper are listed below. They work for the following organizations:

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